



JOSE ROSALES 2023-12-05

ON ANTI-FORGETFULNESS WARS AND ANTI-OBLIVION STONES: AN INTERVIEW WITH NASSER ABOURAHME

NECROPOLITICS CAPITALISM, HAMAS FASCISM, WAR

The following interview with Nasser Abourahme took place on 11 November 2023 and covers a range of issues related to the struggle for Palestinian liberation: the economic consequences of Israel's unforgiving siege of Gaza on its domestic economy; the notion of the military and the moral as the twin fronts of Palestinian liberation; the global wave of solidarity action; the inherent limits of applying the concept of revolution inherited from previous cycles of revolutionary struggle to the Middle East, in general, and the Palestinian Revolution, in particular; the nationwide repression of Palestinian solidarity protests on US college campuses; and the Palestinian's refusal to accept more than 70 years of reactionary

forgetting and Israel's history of laying siege to Palestinian life, whether in Beirut (1982) or at present in the Gaza strip. As an Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern and North African Studies at Bowdoin College, Dr. Abourahme's research brings together (i) the novel insights derived from investigations into those multiple temporalities inherent to the concept of revolution despite having been historically overlooked and (ii) the disciplinary concerns of Middle Eastern Studies and Area Studies in light of our postcolonial present. The following conversation has been transcribed and lightly edited for clarity.

Jose Rosales [JR]: *Ever since the start of Israel's military campaign against Gaza, analysts have already noted how it has already taken its toll on the country's economy. By the end of the third week of the campaign, Israel's "stocks and currency had fallen" causing the Shekel to fall to its weakest ever since 2012 as several businesses and schools continued to remain closed. Moreover, by mobilizing 350,000 reservists prior to its ground offensive on the Gaza strip, Israel drained roughly 8% of the [country's] workforce. On 30 October, Al Jazeera English reported that production at a major gas field that accounts for 70% of Israel's energy needs has stopped. These are just some of the factors that have led to the Israeli government's call for a "war time stimulus" as well as the proposal by US president Joe Biden of sending \$105 billion in an "aid and relief" package to further Israel's campaign. As of 4 December, Israel has killed more than 15,500 Palestinians, including more than 5,800 children and at least 3,900 women. Meanwhile, Israel's main geopolitical allies (the United States and European Union) appear to be entirely comfortable with an increasing number of Palestinian lives lost amidst an unfolding genocide that is being live-streamed for the whole world to witness in real-time. In light of both the viciousness of Israel's response and the unwavering support it has received from its allies, you recently stated, "there is nothing that was surprising about the events of the last couple of weeks." Perhaps it is a naive question, but what do you think it will take for Israel's main backers — from the US and key EU member-states to the United Nations Security Council itself — to begin withdrawing their support for Israel's accelerated campaign of genocide?*

Nasser Abourahme [NA]: The first thing to note, which comes out in your prefatory comments, is that as a settler-colonial outpost in this part of the world, the Israeli state has never been able to survive without this type of military, logistic, financial, ideological support from let's just say "the West." That said, I am also tempted to think about your question historically. In other words, "Why has the nature of this relationship been so consistent over time?" And implied within this question is the further, more pressing question of "Why is it so assiduously held onto now?" In light of the scale of the killing, and in light of what is now an emerging consensus regarding the genocidal dimensions of Israel's current campaign, why does the "West" cling on to it now? Now, despite the slight differences among the various answers to these questions, there is something about the historical conjuncture today that Israel is a part of, that animates the ferocity of this support and the closing of the ranks among its Western allies. What is more, the answer to these questions is intimately connected to the historical relationship between the West and the Israeli state.

So, why has Israel been supported as a project for so long? I think we have a pretty solid analysis of the role that the Israeli state has played within broader imperial orders. Moreover,

the frameworks of imperialism have been pretty adept at getting at that so I don't think there are many secrets. From its earliest role within the British empire, the Zionist project was explicitly seen as part of a way of managing that part of the world. And, of course, this project fit hand-in-glove into the British imperial order, because it slotted perfectly into a racial imaginary that saw and constructed the world along racial lines. If you track the era of European imperialism in the region, from the slow dismembering of the Ottoman Empire, to the emergence of ethnonationalism (i.e. a racial nationalism) in the Balkans and in Anatolia itself, what you find is the consolidation of explicitly racialized visions of the world. So, in this context, supporting a settler-colonial project like Israel made sense to 'West'. And had they had their way, the whole region would have been even further divided along racial, sectarian, lines. This framework, moreover, always had a certain material utility. The quote that always gets thrown around these days is from Ronald Storrs, the British military governor of Jerusalem during the British Mandate, who said that "we" [Europeans] are creating "a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism." And this understanding of Israel's role in the region remained fairly consistent during the era of American-led imperialism, especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The most obvious role that the Israeli state has played in this respect has been in blocking substantial left alternatives in the region, be they pan-socialist or third-world nationalist. Israel was integral to crushing the emergence of postcolonial strengthened military capacity at a local scale. Whether one considers the role the Israelis played in the extension of the Iran-Iraq War through the Iran Contra Affair when the US armed both sides of that conflict, or Israel's role in the demise of Abdul Nasser's Egypt; or Israel's role in the US' repression of left-wing movements in Central America — the benefits of maintaining Israel as a geopolitical ally vis-a-vis the "West" are fairly clear.

There is, moreover, another dimension to this relationship that one could call ideological, or even civilizational. This has to do with the project of 'moral recovery' on the part of Europe after the Holocaust and Naziism, which is an attempt to create a form of moral absolution and, thereby, morally reposition a white, European, civilization. But this project is not an immaterial thing, which is why I don't like these hard and fast distinctions between ideology and materialism. And it is here that Zionism continues to play an important role, with this project of moral recovery/absolution, precisely because it underwrites Europe's own forgetting and closure of colonial history. With Naziism, Europe found itself in a situation where colonialism was turned inward. And in response, alongside the singularized and exceptional treatment of the Holocaust, which is viewed as being without measure, one finds the incubation of Zionism and the offloading of anti-semitism onto black and brown people across the world. So it is this two-fold treatment of Europe's own history that becomes the rationale for not thinking about anything else within colonial history. This moment where European colonialism was turned inward is disconnected from colonial history *tout court*, and to compare anything to it is tantamount to questioning its moral significance. In the end, however, these two historical phenomena are related: the very direct role the Israeli regime has played in the imperial management of this geostrategic part of the world simultaneously operates in the service of the ideological-civilizational project of moral recovery in light of a post-Nazi, post-Holocaust, and *post-colonial* Europe.

This brings us to the second part of the question: Why is the 'West' so assiduously clinging onto their relationship with Israel now? From within the discipline of International Relations,

there are those who have said that the “West” has gone overboard with this unequivocal show of support for Israel insofar as Israel is not, at present, the most important region when considered geostrategically. Thus, someone like John Mearsheimer is losing his mind because, for him, Israel is not seen as a strategic priority. While the regions of strategic importance are, of course, Europe, China, and the Persian Gulf. For Mearsheimer, [the US’s] doubling-down on support for the Israelis is counterproductive because the ‘West’ is not focusing on the real threat, which is coming from China. By contrast, you have someone like Robert F. Kennedy who, during his campaign trail, echoed Joe Biden’s recently-surfaced sentiment (“If Israel didn’t exist, the US would have to invent an Israel”) and defended the US’ ongoing support by stating that “Israel is a bulwark for us [...] It’s almost like having an aircraft carrier in the Middle East.” In any case, the nature of war is such that it elevates geopolitics to the surface while bracketing/displacing other, equally important, concerns. It is precisely this subordination of other concerns to the geopolitical that has characterized what is essential in the colonial question ever since the era of “formal decolonization.” But even from within this geopolitical perspective, how does one explain the American military’s frenetic response in the form of sending aircraft carriers and nuclear-armed submarines alongside additional personnel throughout the region? Is this frenetic response just a continuation of this two-fold process of the imperial-material and ideological-civilizational functions proper to the ‘West’ as a hegemonic project that I have tried to outline above? Is there an even stronger need for this now? At the very least, what is clear is that, ever since the debacle of the “forever wars” and the “War on Terror,” the US has been searching for its own civilizational alibi, which, in a certain sense, has been turned inwards and has come home to roost in their own way: the moral and political quagmire of the US — the arc of Trumpism and the country’s permanent crises — has a certain relationship to the stuntedness of the “forever wars” and has returned in the [fascistic] form of militarism, hyper-masculinity, xenophobia, and border anxieties. Coupled with the obvious reality of the end of a unipolar world, it seems that, within these ruling classes, there is a search for a way out of the stuntedness of the preceding decades. And this is a search for which Zionism and philosemitism are perceived as part of the solution.

JR: During his 1983 interview with David Barsamian, Eqbal Ahmad remarked that the success of the movement for Palestinian liberation would not be decided by military victory but by a victory in the “moral war.”¹ Forty years separates us from Ahmad and Barsamian’s conversation and, if anything, Israel’s response to the 7 October attacks in the form of an accelerated genocide and unforgivingly cruel airstrikes seems to have ushered us into a situation wherein juridical categories (e.g. crimes against humanity, genocide) have been all but evacuated of their meaning. Insofar as every liberation struggle needs mass popular support, what are the structuring dynamics proper to the current ‘moral war’ that distinguishes it from the context of the early 1980s? That said, given the full throated support of genocide by the global North, can we still speak of both ‘militarized warfare’ and ‘morality’ as the twin fronts in the struggle for Palestinian Liberation?

NA: I think there are two points to mention about this. First, that there is a moral-ideological war to be fought, and that part of this will be fought in the global North. But it cannot be based on a politics of recognition or inclusion, wherein Palestinians seek to approximate

some figure of humanity that is legible to the West: the West will never recognize the figure of a humanity that fights back and it barely recognizes the figure of humanity in Palestinian death. This version of a liberal, inclusive, Humanism is a dead-end. You have to fight on your own terms and the ideological and moral victories will follow from such forms of struggle.

Second, it is becoming clear that Israel — as an isolated pariah regime — is just as deadly. Given that the nature of procedural liberal, democratic politics in the West is not really representative, and cannot be described in terms of popular sovereignty in any meaningful sense, one could win the moral-ideological battle and the policies of these states won't change at all. We spoke about how demonstrations do make a difference, but it is not clear to me that US policy makers are going to give up on the Israeli regime because there is moral outrage. Given the nature of the duopoly in a country like the United States, and given how powerful its counter-democratic institutions are, I don't think there is any guarantee that US policy will change in the near future. In a certain sense, the Israeli regime is less susceptible to the kind of pressure that eventually toppled apartheid in South Africa since the current "superpowers" will hold on to the Israeli regime for much longer than they held onto apartheid South Africa. And for a lot of reasons — partly because of the nature of internal politics and the power of the Zionist lobby in the US, but also because, as I said in the beginning, they see their own global capacities as so intermingled with Israeli state-interests; namely with respect to the ideological-civilizational dimension proper to the relationship between Israel and the "West". If one were to draw an analogy, the situation is much closer to Rhodesia's relationship to South Africa rather than South Africa's relationship to the "West": i.e. they will hold onto it even when it becomes a moral pariah. Hence my emphasis on the forms of struggle that fight on their own terms. Again, this doesn't mean that there aren't any limits to anti-colonial violence but it means fighting on your own terms and cautioning against the notion that a moral-ideological victory, on its own, will shift the balance of forces. It's important, but it's not enough.

JR: *The way in which Palestinian solidarity is subject to state capture differs according to region and context — while the US state has resorted to a modernized, Islamophobic, McCarthyism, the leaders of neighboring countries such as Egypt and Syria, and the regimes of Erdogan and Khamenei, have found themselves caught between managing a society-wide show of support for Palestine and their own investment in the further concentration and centralization of wealth as functionaries of the regional comprador bourgeoisie. Ever since 7 October, I have found myself returning to Mahmoud Darwish's Memory For Forgetfulness, and this passage in particular: "Heroism invites boredom when the scene goes on too long [...] Pushed to the point of boredom so that Arab leaders, faced with this heroism, can proclaim the causes of misery; Palestine is responsible for the disappearance of wheat from the fields; for the flourishing of an architecture whose crowning gems are prisons [...] burdening the state with debts the ordinary citizen would need two lifetimes to pay back [...] They [the US] have turned the Arab stomach into a hostage and declared war, with weapons and with silence, against the subject of heroism."*² **When assessing the track record of leaders, whether foreign or domestic, it seems that each of these political actors find every self-interest in Palestinian liberation except for the actual liberation of Palestine. By contrast, support for both resistance and transformation in Palestine is more likely to be found amongst**

the self-organization of people themselves. And so, what are some of the forms of solidarity action that you have found to be helpful in furthering Palestinians' struggle against Israel's settler-colonial project?

NA: I'd say two things. First, there has been an incredible mobilization of various forms of solidarity and the consistency of the demonstrations and the transformation of demonstrations into direct action — particularly now when we are beginning to see these forms of mobilization spill over into labor organizing, with labor unions blocking shipments and boats destined for Israel — is crucial. And it is crucial both in terms of their immediate effects on armament and work stoppage and in terms of the wider arc of struggle, which will extend beyond this current moment in spite of how painful the current moment may be. Put another way, every period of mobilizations and demonstrations has more than one end. And part of this set of ends are organizational in nature. Thus, while you may not always stop something when you go out to demonstrate and may not always create a new reality, you do create the conditions for further organizing with new comrades and on the basis of newfound complicities. We are seeing this on a very wide scale today, and in some places this process becomes transformative. Moreover, it has been striking and beautiful to see the degree of militancy exhibited by Jewish activists and Jewish-led activism in the US, because there is a growing awareness with groups like Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP) that the moment calls for a more direct form of mobilization. And these are the places where you see the outlines of a form of struggle that exceeds solidarity or allyship and becomes an imbricated struggle, or a co-struggle, with a sense of a mutuality in liberation, which, I think, is important since it has a pretty profound ideological resonance. One must not forget that these mobilizations and what they create are constitutive moments that make real differences in their own ways.

The people on the ground in Gaza have themselves said that they take a lot of hope from these images of global demonstrations of solidarity. So that in itself means something. And yet... they're faced with the immediacy of slaughter, the immediacy of violence, the immediacy of the geopolitical plane. This is something that takes us back to Darwish's tenor of disappointment in the passage you cited, where one finds themselves at the heart of those capacities for force that only state-machinery, or things akin to state-machinery, have. And, again, one finds themselves in a bind because, at a certain register, the geopolitical frame is a trap and no one knows that better than the Palestinians. For example, before the Israelis invaded [Beirut] in 1982, it's the Syrian regime that initially thwarted, not just the Palestinian revolution, but the entire Lebanese National Movement, which with its transitional program, was on the cusp of a very serious, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist victory. In Lebanon in 1976, the Lebanese National Movement had routed the right, which was in a position where it was forced to bargain and compromise over this transitional program that would have undone the linkages in Lebanon between sectarianism and class politics. The success of this program would have situated Lebanon on the road toward a socially redistributive regime that would have undone sectarianism and positioned it much more firmly within the arc of anti-imperialist forces. But it was the Syrian state — the ostensibly socialist, baathist, state — that crushed that possibility in '76 and besieged a Palestinian refugee camp. So the betrayal and machinations of geopolitics are very well known, or at least should be very well known, to the Palestinians. *And yet... and yet...* [Laughter] 'Where do you find yourselves today?' [as Darwish would have most likely asked].

While I don't want to diminish the importance of demonstrations, the question still remains: what are the forces, today, that stand between Palestinians and complete obliteration? [18:24] Well, one has to be very clear and honest: it is the forces that are mobilizing a military force against the Israeli state. There are, of course, lots of contradictions pertaining to that fact, but there is no way to ignore the fact itself — it's the resistance factions in Gaza, it's Hezbollah, the resistance factions in Southern Lebanon, Ansar Allah in Yemen, the popular mobilization units in Iraq. And yes, this flattens out a lot of the contradictions in the region but that is the nature of the moment.

This is my second point. There's a necessity today for a renewed appreciation of the arc of anticolonial struggle over the last two decades when it comes to the fight against Zionism. And here we have to refuse separating the "good" types of struggle that people in the West like to relate to (civic struggle and non-violent protest, even though the West doesn't like the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions [BDS] movement) from the other forms of struggle that people have been waging on the ground and which the West finds less palatable (i.e. forms of armed struggle, forms of insurrection). An appreciation of the present moment today has to take into consideration the full gamut of struggle. One must consider about two and a half decades of all of these, multi-front, struggles that have come together and then departed on certain issues, but nonetheless have brought us to this current moment, with its opportunities and its threats. For instance, all of this cannot be divorced from the liberation of southern Lebanon in 2000, or the victory of Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon-Israel war. Similarly, the resistance factions and Gaza's ability to withstand and withhold, and to develop new forms of struggle should not be separated from the BDS campaign and its growing influence; nor should these be divorced from the work done by various groups on the ground, in the global north, and in the global south, around labor organizing and labor mobilization and the creation of anti-normalization groupings. People find it difficult to talk about armed struggle, JVP, and BDS in a single breath, but at a certain level they are all interconnected. And this is precisely what I think is at play in the current moment.

We have to keep in mind the historical nature of a national liberation or people's war in a colonial context. Colonial power is premised on its ability to create a logic of non-reciprocity; on its ability to live in proximate, intimate, geographical relations with those it subjugates but without being touched by them. As Achille Mbembe put it, it is a form of proximity without reciprocity. Anticolonial struggle seeks to invert that relationship. Given the significant degree of mythology surrounding Israeli invincibility and its military machine, people tend to forget about the nature of guerrilla struggle and how it connects to broader civic, labor, or diplomatic forms of struggle. And yet these forms of struggle do come together in such a way as to combine the military, the moral, the ideological, and the material, and in ways capable of reversing the colonial logics of non-reciprocity and of untouchability. Similarly, this is why the colonial response has to be so overwhelming. People may talk about proportionality and get trapped in the language of international law only to miss the fact that the colonial response *has* to be disproportionate. The whole point is reestablishing deterrence that is based, not on a state-to-state deterrence, but on the immunological logic of non-reciprocity such that 'I can do what I want to you, but I cannot be contaminated by you.' So, if you want to think of the forms of solidarity globally, one has to think about this arc of struggle over the last two decades and the way that logic begins to be challenged.

JR: *Of the various parts one could cite from your essay, 'Revolution after Revolution: The Commune as Line of Flight in Palestinian Anticolonialism,' I found the following passage to be especially productive for critically assessing the categories and frameworks inherited from previous cycles of struggle: "For all its use as judgment, revolution itself arguably resists the success/failure binary. Our modern concept of revolution is not only defined by a set of antinomies (freedom/necessity, distinctly man-made/naturally irresistible, impossible/inevitable, cyclical/ruptural), but [...] revolution also appears as both that in which every victory is also a defeat...and, equally, that in which every defeat is also a victory [...] Koselleck who, in reckoning with the concept as a force field that might outstrip even the modernity that was its condition, fails to fully secure it to any final content and leaves the door ajar for its reconfiguration in new spaces of experience. Instead of evaluating the history of the Palestinian Revolution, then, how can we read it through the present of our own revolutionary perspective? Or, put differently...can we read it from the perspective of the field of possible experiences it opens up in the present?"*³ *One of the essay's cardinal epistemic virtues, in my opinion, is the explicit articulation of this paradoxical and unresolved status of the Palestinian Revolution: revolutionary movements, you note, seem to always appear as victorious and defeated at the same time. And yet, despite this shared point of agreement, what remains lacking are the reasons as to why revolution appears as this paradoxical phenomena where victory and defeat coincide; where, beyond either success or failure, the party of victors are indistinct from the party now defeated. If "this field of possible experiences" inheres in the lasting, material, effects of the Palestinian Revolution during the late 1960s to 1980s, and if "revolution itself arguably resists the success/failure binary," is there something singular to periods of revolutionary struggle that exceeds every assessment that remains invested in victory and defeat as final judgements?*

NA: This is a really thorny issue in the study of revolution, especially for those of us who want to move beyond a political-sociological, or positivist take, whereby the only revolution is the successful one, which leads to a clear transition and a different social order. Again, there are at least two ways to disaggregate your question. On the one hand, there is the conceptual-historical approach, which would analyze the very concept of revolution itself and the various analytic limitations it has faced. On the other hand, we can approach revolution via a conjunctural analysis wherein we discover that, perhaps, revolution meant something else during a previous historical moment while asking whether or not the content of revolution, itself, needs to change along with history.

Regarding the conceptual-historical approach, which is what I was trying to get at in the article you mentioned, a certain antinomy has always structured revolution and its various appreciations, both as a concept and as a lived history. Thus, I tried to put forward the view that within the arc of revolutionary struggles, defeats are never final — and here I lean on Marx and his appreciation of 1848 in order to emphasize his insight that while the revolution may be defeated in 1848, its defeat lays the foundations for a deeper re-enactment in the future such that the coming revolution will necessarily be even more transformative. Related to this is a further claim that acknowledges how every victory is also a defeat insofar as that final horizon of a society without struggle is entirely chimerical and is one of the primary blindspots of a certain iteration of Marxist thought — i.e. just because there may be an end to

class struggle it does not mean that it is the end of struggle as such. In this vein, about a century and a half after Marx, Giorgio Agamben criticizes Marxism, in spite of its successes in social revolutions, for uncritically inheriting the logics of sovereignty and the state and, thereby, unwittingly reproducing the instruments of a sovereign logic. So this is one way of thinking about the antinomies that inherently structure the concept of revolution. Do those antinomies push us to think about revolution beyond this organizing grammar?

In the article, I quote Deleuze's remark that those who say 'revolutions always turn out badly' confuse the way revolutions play out historically and people's revolutionary becomings. It is worth noting that this truism (the tragedy of revolution), which repeats the old adage that the revolution will devour its own children, is itself premised on a Eurocentric image of revolution insofar as the 'revolution' that, generally speaking, always turns out badly is modeled after one revolution in particular: i.e. the French Revolution. By distinguishing between the historical outcomes of revolutions and revolutionary becomings, Deleuze shows how the larger questions of transition, or state capture that revolutionaries are interested in aren't really what's at stake, since what is at stake within revolutions is what happens to people and the kinds of social relations that follow from those encounters. And in a certain sense, Deleuze's insights gain in importance when thinking about the non-European world, anti-colonial revolution, and thinking about the present. This is especially the case with respect to the Palestinian Revolution, since to inquire into the nature of revolution in light of an anti-colonial revolution that did not lead to either the seizure of state power or a program of transition allows us for a reassessment of the concept of revolution itself. Now, of course, there is a certain understanding of revolution where these experiences would be dismissed as not revolutionary, or at best as an experience of a failed or defeated revolution where one may have an experience of revolutionary openings or revolutionary situations, but not of revolutionary outcomes in the language of someone like Charles Tilly, for example. That said, the point of my article is to argue that viewing revolutions through lenses such as these, one inevitably misses something. So in this sense, I am more aligned with someone like Massimiliano Tomba whose very interesting book, *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity* (2019), outlines the alternate temporalities that exist in all revolutions. For instance, while the French Revolution takes a certain direction with Republicanism, it remains the case that it harbored within itself anti-colonial and anti-racist temporalities that were imposed on it by the Haitian Revolution. So it is these alternate temporalities within revolutions that remain unaccounted for when studying revolutions through the antinomic framework of victory/defeat. And this chimes with your use of the term 'inheritance' in your question, which brings me to the second reading of revolution.

So, on the one hand, the concept and history of revolution can be viewed as always having been in tension and understood via the binary of victory-defeat; on the other hand, to begin by thinking about 'inheritance' is to think about the specificity of the conjuncture *at present*. It is to inquire into the nature of revolution in the post-cold war, post-neoliberal, post-colonial moment — defined by an immense reorganization of both state and capital and the emergence of a security-state that makes certain forms of political contestation much more difficult. In such a context, do the avenues of seizing state power and state-led transition even exist in the same way today as they did during the prior conjuncture? For instance, if we look back to the Arab Spring in 2011, even the most heterodox commentators concluded that the

events choked at the very moment of transitioning revolt into revolution. So, if one is going to attempt to uncover these seemingly more minor episodes in revolutionary history as a *kind* of inheritance, do they have something to teach us about the state of the revolutionary perspective today? Can we uncover things from these “minor” experiences, such as the Palestinian Revolution’s experience with creating territory and the communalization, that would open up different horizons of revolutionary thought and action in the present? I think that is a very hard question to answer. But the point of the essay was to pose these questions rather than to answer them. There are many people who would say that the turn to ‘subject formation,’ or the turn to ‘communal autonomy’ and the abandoning of seizing state power is a cop out. And, I wouldn’t necessarily say that they are entirely wrong. But I would say that it is nonetheless worth uncovering those inheritances in order to think about the modalities of action and thought that aren’t reducible to the orthodox visions of revolutionary transformation.

JR: *Given the current climate of repression in the US, I thought it was notable that the student-run weekly newspaper at your university, The Bowdoin Orient, published a series of reflections on Palestine as a means “to educate [the Bowdoin community] on the ongoing violence in Israel and Palestine.” Do you have a sense of which university’s are taking a more draconian stance on pro-Palestinian solidarity actions and those, like Bowdoin, that have opted for a popular education approach? Moreover, what are the really existing possibilities for furthering support for Palestinian liberation on a campus with a paper like The Bowdoin Orient? Does solidarity meet its limit at the university presses?*

NA: First of all, it’s worth noting that there is an incredible climate of repression and censure in the country as a whole that is targeting academic institutions and that many academic institutions are complicit in. Having worked in US academic institutions for well over a decade, the current situation is the worst I have ever seen. Currently, you have chapters of student groups being banned or suspended; you have a huge push of what is essentially a kind of lawfare that even threatens to use very draconian anti-terrorism laws against student activists, which is a push made by the Anti-Defamation League in conjunction with a center at Brandeis University. At the same time, you have the US Senate passing specific bills aimed at stifling student activism in support of Palestine. So you have a very top-down, hierarchical, atmosphere of censure and repression. And it is worth noting here that the ferocity of this response indicates a real weakness and anxiety in the ranks of the establishment. I mean, you don’t really resort to censure, lawfare, doxxing, and attempts to cancel classes (which is what the ADL tried to do with one class at Bard College), unless there is a sense that one has already lost the ideological battle. Seen within this larger context, and the air of desperation particular to this moment, the university becomes a space of contestation in which there is a de facto alignment between the ideological forces of Zionism and the broader American right-wing of the culture wars. That is, today, the part of the US political spectrum that advocates for Zionism — which extends well beyond the right and includes huge portions of the liberal class — have found themselves effectively lined up alongside the new right in demands to purge curricula, ban books, cancel events, dox students, or punish activists. And this is not coincidental, there is a shared bedrock of politics, and what is common to both the anti-Black or anti-Critical Race Theory campaigns and the pro-Zionist wings of the US culture

wars is the refusal to actually think about colonial history, that is the actual and living history of these societies.

So there is a real palpable anxiety surrounding the gains that have been made by critical thought in settler-colonial studies, in colonial history, in critical theory around these questions. And this is coming from the political right as well as the Zionist putschists who are now invested in stopping classes, censoring student groups, discrediting the use of certain analytical frameworks. This type of politics, at its core, is a politics of foreclosure, active forgetting, and dehistoricization. Moreover, while both of these political currents are at the forefront of campus politics, the Zionists are the ones who have been able to gain more traction within more liberal campuses due to their ever so thinly veiled and disingenuous claims of fighting against anti-Semitism. So we've seen a real clamp down on student activism — recently we saw a black student at Harvard who had been evicted from their campus housing due to their role as a steward at a demonstration, just as we've seen cops at Brandeis University use direct violence to break up demonstrations, while both Brandeis and Columbia University have taken the decision to suspend one or both of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). So things are reaching a real threshold at the moment. But despite how draconian these measures are, they remain a rearguard effort.

The second point I wanted to make is that this has to also be understood within the context of class power and the connections between imperial power and class power. Why is it that there is such a gaping chasm, not just between student views and university administration, but the views of faculty and those of administration? If you compare the letters being written by faculty members with those written by college and university presidents, there is a sea of difference between the two. And I think that the only way to really understand that is to remember that universities and colleges, at an institutional and administrative level, are concentrated expressions of a specific strata of class power. For everything else that happens in colleges in which we remain invested as scholars and activists, at a certain level these institutions are captured by those formations. To put it in the kindest way possible: boards of trustees are boards of wealthy people. Or to be a bit more precise: boards of trustees represent certain formations of class power. And it is those formations, more than anything else, that frame the tenor of university administrations. You see something similar happening within the world of arts and culture. If you compare the letters and the positions of the practitioners and artists to the clamp down by gallery owners, museum boards of trustees, and so on. To be clear, some of these board members, such as the former member of the board at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, Warren Kanders, are current stakeholders in the arms industry, despite his claims of divestment. This is a phenomena that we find repeated throughout society's institutions and is therefore not unique to universities and colleges — and with each iteration one finds a similar cross-section of class society, of a bourgeois-historical bloc. So one has to keep this imbrication between these class dimensions and the imperial ordering of the world mind. People know that their class positions come with a certain domination of the world and Zionism is part and parcel of that. So the chasm between practitioners, scholars, artists, faculty and the administrators is precisely this: the administrators have to represent the broad interests, whether spoken or unspoken, of the class formations that own and run these institutions.

In terms of specific colleges: the degrees of freedom allowed to students and activists will depend on what the administration will allow for, how much pressure they come under, and their willingness to withstand this pressure. The students at Bowdoin and the students who run The Bowdoin Orient are a very organized, motivated, and smart bunch. And I think that they have taken the initiative and have put together some really great events, both those who are part of Students for Justice in Palestine and those who are part of The Bowdoin Orient. These students have created a space for critical thought, pedagogy and exchange. And the college, to its credit, has been very receptive to them. Compared to the forms of censure and repression faced by students organizing at Columbia or Brandeis, student organizing at Bowdoin finds itself operating in a very different context.

JR: During these moments, it is typical for journalists to ask Palestinians whether they are pessimistic or optimistic regarding the future of Palestine. So, to spare you from rehearsing Emile Habibi's oft-cited *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, I wanted to return one last time to *Memory for Forgetfulness* — particularly to that scene where Darwish asks himself whether or not these Palestinian youth, born in Lebanese refugee camps and now committed to the armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine, knew that “by putting the siege under siege” they were “revealing to the misguided Prophet of Doom the secrets of a heroism woven by the movement from the self-evident to the self-evident [...] as if dignity had the power to choose between self-defense and suicide.”⁴ In light of such out and out warfare, Darwish offers one of his most summary descriptions of the fundamental character of the struggle for Palestinian liberation: “Anti-forgetfulness wars; anti-oblivion stones. No one wants to forget. More accurately, no one wants to be forgotten.”⁵ So I was wondering... do you have a personal anti-oblivion stone that you turn to in these moments?

NA: [Laughter] That's a really beautiful question.

So there is a split since at times I want to retreat into books, thought, history and try to take a view of the long durée as some kind of solace, but the immediacy of the moment makes that very difficult. There is so much grief and pain that has to constantly be pushed down to just get through the day and make it from one day to the next. And the distance is hard because I grew up in Palestine and it feels very dislocating to experience it at a distance and through a screen. But when I want to get over the shadow of despair, I turn to the people there in Gaza and try to listen, read, and hear what they say, what they think, what they do, how they fight, and how they refuse. And I think there is a lot from which to take stock from there in terms of how people fight back. Again, I'm not shy about the fact that people engaged in armed struggle against this invasion are heroic. One can take a lot of stock by looking at how they did that as well as from images of ordinary people. Just two days ago, I saw an image of a guy pulled out of the rubble on a stretcher. And as he is being carried to the ambulance somehow finds the strength and the wherewithal to lift himself up off his back and give the victory sign to those around him. I think of the parents that have to bury their children in mass, unmarked, graves and who come out in the streets the very next day saying ‘we're not going anywhere, we won't leave.’ These scenes of courage and humanity, to me, are anti-oblivion; are anti-forgetfulness; scenes of that are full of an affirmative desire to live in the face of everything.

1. Eqbal Ahmad, 'The Palestinian Question,' *Confronting Empire: Interviews with David Barsamian*, (South End Press: 2000), 52-3. For context, Barsamian stated the following: "...liberation struggles need to morally isolate the adversary. I'll give you that, with a qualification: it has to be an adversary that subscribes, at least on a rhetorical level, to liberal democratic traditions." Ahmad's reply: "Obviously, you couldn't morally isolate the regimes of Hitler or Stalin. A strategy of moral isolation assumes that the adversary has based its own legitimacy on moral grounds."
↩
2. Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory For Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*, trans. Ibrahim Muhawi (University of California Press: 2013) 98-9.
↩
3. Nasser Abourahme, 'Revolution after Revolution: The Commune as Line of Flight in Palestinian Anticolonialism,' *Critical Times* 4.3 (December 2021), 445-75, 460.
↩
4. **Note:** Darwish's mention of the "Prophet of Doom" is most likely a reference to Ariel Sharon, the Israeli minister of defense who launched the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Darwish, *Memory For Forgetfulness*, 12.
- 5.
6. taken from here: <https://thetragiccommunity.wordpress.com/2023/12/05/on-anti-forgetfulness-wars-and-anti-oblivion-stones-an-interview-with-nasser-abourahme/>
↩
7. *Ibid*, 15. ↩

← PREVIOUS NEXT →

META

CONTACT

FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM

DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES

TAGS

AUTHORS

ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

TWITTER